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By Thomas Fitzgerald

INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

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By now, the sequence is familiar: Barack Obama has a political problem. Barack Obama gives a stellar speech that changes the conversation. Barack Obama lives to fight another day.

In 2008, of course, it was an oration about race in America that calmed the controversy over his pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright. In September 2009, President Obama reframed the health-care debate after weeks of protests of Democrats' overhaul plans.

But, no matter what he said tonight in his first State of the Union address, it was unlikely that Obama would be able to quickly turn around the mess he finds himself in now, after a year of the realities of governing.

With his health-care proposal stalled, his filibuster-proof majority in the Senate gone, and his approval rating slumping, Obama shifted his administration's focus to the economy and jobs - the top worries of Americans.

The speech came eight days after the Massachusetts Senate election victory of Republican Scott Brown showed the depth of voter frustration with the economy and federal spending. Obama had to show that he gets the public's anger and that he's doing something about it.

"Change has not come fast enough," Obama said. "Some are frustrated; some are angry. They don't understand why it seems like bad behavior on Wall Street is rewarded but hard work on Main Street isn't; or why Washington has been unable or unwilling to solve any of our problems."

It is time, Obama said, for Republicans and Democrats to "overcome the numbing weight of our politics."

For good populist measure, he bashed lobbyists and banks.

While the GOP has resisted Obama's policies and proposals in Congress, the bigger political threat he faces is a divided Democratic Party - liberals upset at the slow pace of change and his willingness to compromise, and centrists worried about spending and growth in government.

Here is the party's dilemma: Obama's approval rating among independents has fallen nearly 20 points since early last year. At the same time, some party strategists warn that a demoralized left could dampen turnout in this year's elections, with congressional seats and governorships at stake.

For those concerned about deficits and national debt, Obama proposed a three-year freeze in

discretionary federal spending except for national security, and asked for a commission that would help balance the budget, a proposal that could not pass the Senate on Tuesday.

Yet much of the speech dealt with the economy, and Obama proposed tax incentives for small business and relief for the middle class, such as a bigger child-care tax credit. These were the kind of incremental policies that President Bill Clinton turned to after voters spanked the Democrats in 1994. Liberals derided them, but they were popular.

"The American people are looking for a plan, not a poem," said David Dunphy, a Philadelphia-based Democratic strategist. "People want bullet points: what their government is doing for them and why they should rest assured."

Obama managed to attempt all these rhetorical goals with a tone that was firm and optimistic, not defensive. Presidents shouldn't come across as too angry in the big prime-time setting, but cannot appear weak.

"He has to do a kind of balancing act, show that he understands voters' frustrations . . . but is going to continue to fight on for the things he believes in," said Robert Lehrman, chief speechwriter for former Vice President Al Gore, who teaches the craft at American University (and just wrote *The Political Speechwriter's Companion: A Guide for Writers and Speakers*).

That balancing act is harder than it sounds, Lehrman said. "It's almost impossible to write a compelling hour-long speech with a billion proposals in it," he said.

The latest NBC-Wall Street Journal poll, released Tuesday, found that Republicans don't fare much better in the public mind than Obama.

Forty-eight percent of Americans fault the congressional GOP, while 41 percent blame the Democrats for gridlock in Washington. Still, only 39 percent say Obama has the right goals for the country.

In his speech, he chided both parties, telling the majority Democrats "the people expect us to solve some problems, not run for the hills." To Republicans, he said: "Just saying no to everything may be good short-term politics, but it's not leadership."

Two Philadelphia-area Democratic House members in competitive districts said that Obama made the right move in addressing the economy and federal spending.

His plan to freeze spending is a "huge first step to getting our fiscal house in order," said Rep. Patrick J. Murphy of Bucks County, who called for a similar measure last week. "It's one more spending freeze than President Bush posted in eight years."

Rep. John Adler (D., N.J.) agreed. "We can't tax and spend or borrow and spend our way out of this recession," he said.

For all the attention given the State of the Union ritual, a review of Gallup polling data shows that the speeches rarely change a president's public standing much. Since 1978, only Clinton got a consistent benefit, with an average 3 percent increase in his approval rating across his seven State of the Union speeches.

Clinton got his best boost in 1998, when he announced that the federal budget was balanced and the economy was strong - just days after the news broke of his affair with intern Monica Lewinsky. After the speech, Clinton's Gallup approval rating went up 10 percentage points, to 69 percent.

Gallup's measurement of the partisan composition of State of the Union audiences explains why the speeches don't move the polling needle much: Members of a president's own party are most likely to watch his performance on TV. So Obama's success may depend on how many Republicans and independents he drew tonight.